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Gender defender: Response to ‘Teaching gender: an inter-generational discussion’

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Response to Kelly Coate’s review of *Gender Pedagogy: Teaching, Learning and Tracing Gender in Higher Education*, Emily F. Henderson, Palgrave, (Hdb) 978-1-137-42848-6

Thank you, Kelly, for your review, and for the invitation in return to respond to your review. I am glad you found the discomfort of reading *Gender Pedagogy* ‘helpful’ – I in turn found the discomfort of reading your review helpful, in terms of understanding different possible receptions of the book, and in seeing how ‘I’ came across in that text.

Six years have now passed since I began the work for *Gender Pedagogy*, and quite a lot has happened in that time, so I do not know whether to address my response to Kelly’s review to Kelly, or to that earlier version of myself to whom the review is addressed. At the beginning of her review, Kelly quotes from the first chapter of the book, including this excerpt:

Whichever position you occupy in relation to gender, you will no doubt feel that certain elements of the context I present do not tally with your position (Henderson, 2015, p. 12).

Given the opportunity to respond to Kelly’s review, I ask myself if ‘elements of the context I present[ed]...tally with [my] position’, now that I am a ‘qualified’ academic working in a different university. For I wrote *Gender Pedagogy* in the second year of my doctorate, before I wrote my PhD thesis on gender knowledge production at Women’s Studies conferences (Henderson, 2016), in which I extended both the context of the debates and the theoretical work in *Gender Pedagogy*. Perhaps I should not admit that the book was written by my student self, as this may dissuade potential readers. However I would argue to the contrary that this book does some important work that specifically emerged from my status at that time, and which did some niche-carving work for the concept of gender – for myself and hopefully for some readers.

Kelly was right to pick up on some frustrations that I express in *Gender Pedagogy*. Looking back at *Gender Pedagogy*, I can see the starting knot in the common thread that runs through my work to date – the role of ‘gender defender’. Reading Kelly’s review, I found myself getting into gear for another gender defence, but instead I am going to step back and think through Kelly’s reception of my stance in relation to the concepts of ‘women’ and ‘gender’ as markers for the field of feminist academic knowledge production. This step back is all the more necessary as I think my subsequent work, particularly my PhD thesis and forthcoming co-edited book, *Starting with Gender in International Higher Education Research* (Henderson and Nicolazzo, forthcoming), more strongly express my passionate attachment to the concept of gender, and perhaps this does not come through in the same way in *Gender Pedagogy*.

One of the key texts that underpins the framing of academic feminism in *Gender Pedagogy* is Clare Hemmings' (2011) book *Why Stories Matter*, in which she analyses the narration of feminist positionings in decades of feminist journal articles. Clare uses the terms 'loss narrative' and 'progress narrative' for the ways in which feminist academics often take up positions of authority by dismissing other feminists as either having forgotten what matters or as being obsolete, passé. As mentioned above, *Gender Pedagogy* emerged from a particular moment of my doctoral trajectory, in which I had had a few personal experiences of being positioned against loss narratives, which had automatically positioned me as a purveyor of progress narratives. In the book, I wanted to actively resist taking up a progress narrative, to show respect for previous generations of feminist academics even while questioning some of their work, and this is something that I struggled with throughout writing the book. What I was trying to do, in terms of niche-carving, was to show how gender could be conceptually exciting, even if it had rather superseded the concept of women as the institutional marker of feminist scholarship. I think I needed to show the transition from 'women' to 'gender' in academic feminism as a way of making space for gender to be seen as an interesting concept. As I discuss in detail elsewhere (Henderson, 2014), as well as in this book, in texts that defend the institutional marker 'women' against gender, gender gets a raw deal – at best it seems to be a rather intriguing villain, at worst it is portrayed as bland and apolitical. As Kelly puts it, many feel we are 'stuck with it'. It has been my aim in this and subsequent publications to show the potential for the concept to do the work we need it to do, even if this 'we' comprises multiple generations, feminists and contexts.

Some of the frustration that Kelly picked up on in the book was not so much related to 'loss narratives' of academic feminism, but rather was related to the possibility of crafting a text that truly reflected my politics and principles of knowledge production. One of the contributions of *Gender Pedagogy* which Kelly did not refer to is as a methodological text. When the review came in for the book manuscript, one of the comments was that the title and framing of *Gender Pedagogy* did not reflect its potential to be read as a methodology text, and the reviewer said she would want to use it as a reading for a feminist methodology class. At the time, I did not take this suggestion particularly seriously, but this dimension of the text is quite clear in retrospect. At the book launch, Claudia Lapping stated that she felt that some of the fire in my belly that drove me to write it even while doing my PhD was my accumulated rage at the year of research training courses of which *Gender Pedagogy* was the product. While I can now see the immense benefit brought to me by the compulsory year of research training that was a condition of my PhD funding, the unveiling of said benefit has been very much in hindsight... *Gender Pedagogy*, if read in a certain way, appears as a protest, and act of resistance, the written enactment of a feminist poststructuralist research stance which took quite some fighting to maintain through a number of restrictive assignments – and assignment feedback sheets.

A final point to make about *Gender Pedagogy* is that it is also a text about teaching and learning, and includes questions about how critical and feminist pedagogy sits in contemporary higher education classrooms. From this point of view, I see the book as a genuine call for intergenerational conversation between the academic feminists who brought feminist pedagogy to the classrooms in the first place, and those of us who are politically aligned with its motives and methods but also working in quite

different classrooms now. Thank you for your engagement with my book, Kelly, and for allowing me to revisit those questions and that work.

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